

Campaigner

JOANNE NESS

Two shocking road incidents within a fortnight inspired Joanne to set up a campaign to humanise cyclists and keep us safe. She spoke to **Fiona Duffy**

Joanne Ness vividly recalls receiving the tragic news from her local cycling WhatsApp group one Saturday afternoon in November 2020. Her friend James Middleton and his cycling partner, Martyn Gall, had been involved in a collision while cycling on the A41 in Alvechurch, Worcestershire. Martyn, 41, had died in hospital, leaving behind a wife and two young daughters. James was fighting for his life in intensive care.

"They were both well-known cyclists. The whole cycling community was stunned," recalls Joanne. "It really brought home to me just how vulnerable cyclists are. We had collections to support the families but I kept saying we need to do more."

Joanne and fellow members of the Gorilla Cycling Club in Kings Heath, Birmingham, were still reeling from an altercation with an irate driver two weekends earlier. "I remember angrily thinking 'these people don't seem to realise that we are all daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers – with loved ones waiting for us back home'. It was a light-bulb moment. I realised we needed to give a 'human face' to people riding bikes."

Other club members rallied to help and the More Than a Cyclist movement was born. "None of us had ever done anything like this before but we all felt really strongly about making a difference. As it was still the height of Covid, we had countless meetings over Zoom, shared research and ideas, and devised an eye-catching awareness campaign to launch on social media."

Club members and other local cyclists – including NHS workers, engineers, musicians and students – all volunteered to be the 'faces' of the campaign. "Each was photographed both as a cyclist – in helmet and lycra – and as a 'real person'. Then our graphic designer combined the two faces. The result was amazing."



Right: More Than a Cyclist campaign

The campaign challenges the 'othering' of cyclists by showing we're ordinary people
Below: Joanne Ness

Each image featured a brief summary of the person – including family status and profession – urging drivers to be patient and give room when overtaking.

"In a nutshell, we were urging drivers to remember that 'the cyclist you are about to overtake is a real, loved, person – just like you,'" Joanne adds.

The campaign launched on social media platforms in autumn 2021, triggering a huge response from cyclists and their loved ones. Poignantly, the initiative was supported by Martyn's widow Diane Gall – whose best friend Louise, a critical care worker for the NHS, also appears in the campaign.

As the images were shared and liked, the campaign received worldwide interest from as far afield as Australia. (More Than a Cyclist teamed up with an Australian charity to launch an Australian version of the campaign in Illawarra, in New South Wales, in September.)

More Than a Cyclist also received the backing of Cycling UK. Duncan Dollimore, Cycling UK's head of campaigns, said: "More Than a Cyclist is a fantastic campaign which helps people think and hopefully look out for some of our most vulnerable road users. Cycling UK fully endorses their work and is currently in discussion with the people behind the campaign about how we can support and spread their message."

Joanne, who has since handed over the MTAC reins to Robert Anderson, Bruno Brown, Neil Cocklin and Richard Todd, said: "We are all hopeful this campaign will make a difference. The team is currently photographing more 'faces' for the next stage. These images need to be everywhere – from national TV to the back of buses. It's the only way to get the message across.

"It's not a finger-pointing or blaming exercise," she stresses. "It's about sharing the road and asking motorists, very politely, to please consider us, give us some room when overtaking and don't hurt or kill us." ●

Find out more

To read more about and support More Than a Cyclist, follow the campaign on Facebook and Instagram. You can also find more information on the campaign website, morethanacyclist.org.

Campaigners are hopeful that the message is, slowly, filtering through.

According to statistics, the number of cyclists killed on British roads has dropped by 21% – with a total of 111 losing their lives in 2021 compared to 141 in 2020. (However, the number of cyclists on the roads has also dropped by 21%.)

The driver who crashed into James Middleton and Martyn Gall pleaded guilty to causing death by dangerous driving and causing serious injury by dangerous driving, and was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison.